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Swinehart, Karl

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Text, Transit, and Transformation

Karl Swinehart

The city of La Paz, Bolivia, has other names that do not appear on maps. *Chukiyago* is one. This is the name used by many speakers of Aymara, the language indigenous to this region of Bolivia and neighboring Peru. There are, of course, many Aymara place names throughout the region that appear on all kinds of maps. If one looks at Google's map of this region, one will quickly find many Aymara place names surrounding La Paz, such as *Ch'iyar Qullu* (Black Mountain) or *Incachaca* (Inca Bridge), and also place names within the metropolitan region, such as the neighborhood of Cotahuma, or "Lake Water" (in Aymara, *Quta Uma*). But *Chukiyago* does not appear, and neither does *La Hoyada*, another name for the city. *La Hoyada* is a vernacular place name used by residents of La Paz's neighboring city of El Alto. They refer to La Paz as *la hoyada*, or "the pit," both in earnest and in jest to refer to the half of the metropolitan region that is situated within a steeply descending set of valleys. The El Alto–La Paz metropolitan region is Bolivia's most populous urban area and is divided by possibly the most dramatic geography of any city in the world. Half of the metropolitan region, El Alto, sits atop a high plain at an elevation of 13,000 feet. The city of La Paz is located along the slopes of the descent from the high plain along a river valley down to elevations of 12,000 feet and lower, thus the Alteño's name of *La Hoyada*.

Karl Swinehart is associate professor of social semiotics at the University of Louisville, where he is also the director of graduate studies for the Department of Comparative Humanities. He is the author of *Voice and Nation in Plurinational Bolivia: Aymara Radio and Song in an Age of Pachakuti*.

Figure 1. *Topography of the El Alto–La Paz metropolitan region (retrieved from Google Maps).*

A City Divided

The divides between El Alto and La Paz concern more than the dramatic changes in meters above sea level from one city edge to the other. The average income, access to social services, life expectancy, and any other metric of well-being all drop precipitously as one ascends to the majority Aymara city of El Alto from Bolivia's capital city of La Paz in the adjacent valley below. These differences also correspond to an ethnolinguistic divide between the predominance of Aymaras in El Alto and the surrounding high plains and the European-descended Bolivians concentrated in La Paz. Even the differences between the Aymara and Spanish languages, their very grammar and phonology, have come to be understood for many in terms of this very terrain, with the cold, harsh high plains associated with the dense consonant clusters of Aymara, the La Paz slopes understood as a contested terrain of bilingual urban Aymaras and mestizos, and the lower elevations as the realm of Spanish, of wealth and of warmer, easier living. This configuration of correlations between language, space, climate, and power have sedimented over time, or become *enregistered* in diagrammatic relation to one another, such that they appear as natural to many.[1] In other words, concurrent with the development of demographic facts of urban social geography has been the establishment of a correlative and accompanying semiotic ideology that situates the Aymara language within the high plains and the city of El Alto, marking it as "out of place" elsewhere. Aymara is indigenous to the entire region, not only to certain areas or elevations, and yet the language has come to be understood as "belonging" to the cold, harsh Andean heights.

To understand something in this way, any sign—in this case the Aymara language itself, in terms of enregistered qualities (cold, harsh, rough)—is a semiotic process that has been termed *rhematization* by linguistic anthropologists.[2] Rather than just pointing to a kind of speaker or stereotypical situation of use (*indexicality*), the language is understood as sharing an associated set of qualities (*iconicity*), making it a *rhematic*

rather than a *dicent* relation in the Peircean idiom of semiotic anthropology. Aside from these technical distinctions of semiotic theory, the point here is that for many Bolivians, whether Aymara or not, there has been a naturalization of associations between place, people, and language. The region's landscape has become meaningful in ways that fuse with it notions of people and language. This resonates with insights made by anthropologist Keith Basso in regard to Western Apache territory, namely, that "geographical landscapes are never culturally vacant."[3]

The ways in which the La Paz topography had become imbued with meaning for the people living within it revealed itself to me on various occasions and across different modalities. As mentioned above, on different occasions Aymara speakers and other Bolivians alike described Aymara's complex grammar and challenging consonant clusters as being harsh and difficult, like the climate and terrain of the high plains itself. Making reference to popular culture rather than language, other Bolivians offered a cinematic illustration of this configuration of language, space, climate, and people by way of a classic of Bolivian film; they recommended I watch Óscar Soria and Antonio Eguino's 1977 *Chuquiago,* a film that takes La Paz's Aymara name as its title.[4] Made within a framework of cinematic realism with aims of social commentary, the film accounts for La Paz's raciolinguistic geography across four vignettes: an Aymara child laborer, brought in from the countryside (El Alto); an urban Aymara wanting to assimilate, frustrated in his upwardly mobility (La Paz slopes); a socially precarious bureaucrat (La Paz center); a university student and daughter of the bourgeoisie (La Paz south). The film's poster illustrates this arrangement, and provides a visual representation of the expectations of many residents of La Paz, or *paceños,* of the "expected place" for Aymara being in the high plains and El Alto (see fig. 2). The film's poster gives a dramatic representation of how it is that *upward* and *downward mobility* are ill suited terms for La Paz, where "the low" (in geographic terms) has been "the high" (in socioeconomic terms). To understand this is to grasp the complicated countervalorization at play when residents of El Alto refer to La Paz as *La Hoyada,* "the pit."

The aim of the film's realist narrative was to provoke reflection on the nature of class divisions of the La Paz society of its day, and its concomitant exclusions of race, gender, and language. Decades later, the broad contours of this society remain intact, with sharp demarcations of language, race, and space throughout, or rather up and down, the metropolitan region. In other ways, the film feels like a window onto a world that has disappeared. Bolivia rewrote its constitution through a constituent assembly in 2009, expanding democratic rights, and the presidency of Evo Morales (2006–19) dramatically increased prosperity for the country's Indigenous majority. Yet in other ways, the world depicted in the film feels uncomfortably close for many. *Chuquiago* was filmed in the last year of the Hugo Banzer dictatorship. In 2019, Bolivia suffered another coup and was for one year under the rule of an unelected, military, US-backed "provisional government." Elections in late 2021 restored a democratic government with a landslide victory for the party of ousted president Evo Morales. For all the advances of Morales' *proceso de cambio* (process of change) and the decades that have passed since the filming of *Chuquiago,* the general distribution of wealth and the broad

contours of inequality in El Alto–La Paz depicted in the film still operate for many as a dominant schema for understanding how things are today.

This essay begins with *Chuquiago* not to assess the film's success as realist cinema; many Bolivians have already done that, finding it a compelling representation of La Paz–Chukiyago's social realities. Rather, I open with a discussion of this film for how it foregrounds La Paz's "other" name and as an example of how the city's topography has been enregistered alongside signs of language and social identity. In this regard, the film is a particularly reflexive cultural object as both the result of and an intervention in how Bolivians see and understand their city. Constantine Nakassis has said, in discussing realism and film, that "film is always already acting in the world that it is purported to be distinct from."[5] Films such as *Chuquiago* are well known in Bolivia, forming a canon of "national cinema." These films have often been created within frameworks of realism, social critique, and popular nationalism.[6] In its own way, this film has contributed to enregistering signs of place, race, people, and language for Bolivians.

Figure 2. *Poster for* Chuquiago.

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">Poster for Antonio Eguino's 1977 film Chuquiago as a diagram of stereotypes of the distribution of class, race, and language across the urban space of El Alto–La Paz.</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="5">CHUQUIAGO
Isico
Johnny
Carloncho
Patricia</td><td>The Aymara name of the city sits above the three-peaked outline of Mount Illimani, with the shadow of the city in the foreground, high rises and skyscrapers below, shanties above.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Isico, the young Aymara child sold by rural Aymara parents into servitude to an El Alto merchant (Aymara dominant)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Johnny, the urban Aymara "cholo" living on the slopes of La Paz who holds hopes of assimilating and erasing his Aymara roots (Aymara Spanish bilingual)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Carloncho, the precariously middle-class, white bureaucrat living in the city center (Andean Spanish)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Patricia, the white bourgeois university student living in the wealthy southern lower valley (Spanish)</td></tr>
</table>

With the remainder of this essay, my aim is to examine how these stereotypical configurations of language, people, and space within this metropolitan region are being unsettled through processes of infrastructural transformations in El Alto–La Paz, transformations that move language and people out of the arrangement represented in *Chuquiago*, both in terms of place and language. Not only are people moving in new ways to new places but so too are their languages. This is true for both spoken language and text. My focus here will be on Aymara language text and signage, which is becoming more prominent throughout the city, both in wealthy neighborhoods and within the city's new transit system—a system that is radically reconfiguring city residents' relationship to the broader metropolitan region and their own understandings of their place within it. What follows accounts for shifts in the region's linguistic landscape while attending to the social context of transformation in which these developments occur.[7]

A Changing City

From 2006 to 2019, the Movement to Socialism (MAS)–led government of Evo Morales oversaw massive investments in infrastructure and welfare. This period saw improved living standards for the largely Indigenous rural and urban working classes and a concurrent expansion of an Aymara middle class, particularly in El Alto. Material expressions of this can be seen in the proliferation of the conspicuous construction of homes for an ascendent El Alto middle class, built in the exuberantly Aymara style of the architect Freddy Mamani. These homes are conspicuous for their size, color, and style and have been named *cholets*, a portmanteau of *cholo* and *chalet*. Often commissioned by shrewd Aymara businesswomen, these are monuments to entrepreneurship; more than simply residences, these are mixed-use buildings with the lower levels dedicated to rental for large parties or office space, with a smaller residence perched atop—the "chalet" element.

Below in La Paz, there has been a corresponding, if not universal, mobilization of Aymara language and aesthetics by non-Aymaras in corners of the city where this would have been rare in the decades prior to 2006. In the city's wealthier neighborhoods, fashionable restaurants have Aymara names, often signaling culinary innovations that incorporate Andean food-ways within the context of fine dining to offer haute cuisine reinterpretations of traditional highland dishes.[8] These include restaurants such as Manq'a in the Sopocachi neighborhood, whose name means simply "food" in Aymara (see fig. 3).[9] Further south and at lower elevation, in the even wealthier neighborhoods of Calacoto and Achumani, are two of the most expensive and highest-regarded restaurants in Bolivia, Phayawi and Gustu, both with Aymara names. *Phayawi* means "kitchen" in Aymara, and the name *Gustu* evokes the speech of an Aymara bilingual, being the Spanish word for "taste," *gusto*, with the *o* replaced with *u*, a salient and, in other contexts, stigmatized feature of an Aymara accent.[10] Both of these restaurants have been included in Condé Nast's list of Latin America's fifty best restaurants alongside the likes of Mexico City's Pujol and Astrid y Gastón in Lima.[11] In the realm of musical taste-making, fashionable youth from the city's whiter

southside now throw parties that include Aymara in their names. In 2019, one such party was named *Thuquña Sunset*. This party's name combines the Aymara word for dancing, *thuquña*, alongside the English word *sunset*, juxtaposing the local with the global. The promotional flier for the party prominently featured an image of the dominant and iconic feature the La Paz and El Alto landscape, the three-peaked Mount Illimani (see Fig. 4).

The presence of Aymara language in the names of fashionable restaurants and nightlife contexts in La Paz's wealthy southern neighborhoods represents a new development in the La Paz linguistic landscape. The concept of a linguistic landscape, or "the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region," combines concerns of sociolinguistics, geography, and urban planning and policy.[12] In their now often-cited study, Rodrigue Landry and Richard Y. Bourhis define the linguistic landscape in this manner: "The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combine to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban conglomeration."[13] *Linguistic landscape* emerged as an area of inquiry through examinations of other linguistically divided cities such as Montreal, Brussels, and the cities of the Basque Country.[14]

Research on linguistic landscapes, and language policy more broadly, has often distinguished between "bottom-up" and "top-down" initiatives in language policy in the promotion of Indigenous or otherwise minoritized languages.[15] The examples of fine dining and nightlife Aymara signage mentioned above provide examples of nonstate interventions in the linguistic landscape, ones that would place them within the "bottom-up" side of such a divide. While they are "from the bottom" in the topographical scenario of La Paz's lower altitude wealthy neighborhoods, they could hardly be characterized as "grassroots." They all emanate from Bolivia's most elite social sectors and represent distinctly other-centric voicings of the Aymara language. These instances of rare, but prominent, uses of Aymara language in elite Bolivian contexts remain significant nonetheless. While none of them index the Aymara origin of any of the projects, and their aim of using the Aymara language as a diacritic of local authenticity may well be suspect, they represent positive evaluations of the Aymara language and cultural practices—culinary and musical, in these instances. However these are understood by those involved, they can be understood within a broader context of Aymara uplift and ascendent political power. In this sense, they also point to the shifting terrain for ongoing processes of the Aymara language's enregisterment within a society undergoing social change.

Figure 3. *Restaurant in Sopocachi neighborhood with the Aymara name* Manq'a, *or "Food."*

Figure 4. *A 2019 flier for a rave on La Paz's south side combining Aymara* (thuquña, *"dancing") and English ("sunsets"), set against an image of Mount Illimani with a psychedelic geometric sunburst.*

These mobilizations of Aymara language by non-Aymaras in spaces usually coded as spaces of whiteness constitute a novel intercultural dynamic within the city's linguistic landscape, but this dynamic is not limited to these relatively restricted, niche realms of fine dining and nightlife. We also find Aymara language signage featured prominently throughout one of the largest and most consequential infrastructural changes in the El Alto–La Paz metropolitan region, the development and expansion of the world's largest urban gondola system: *Mi Teleférico.*

This initiative echoes similar interventions elsewhere in the globe where official language policy has aimed to support language revitalization through ensuring bilingual signage as a buttress against language shift toward a more dominant language. In Ireland, for example, the 2004 Placenames Orders instituted bilingual Irish-English

signage throughout that country in an effort to promote the Irish language and public bilingualism. Máriéad Moriarty has noted that too often this was done in a way that often still privileged English by relegating Irish to a folkloristic role within a political economy of tourism, at times bringing local communities into conflict with language planners.[16]

As tempting as "bottom-up" and "top-down" characterizations of nonstate or state-led initiatives may be, such easy binaries rarely adequately nor accurately account for the dynamics at play. In neighboring Brazil, linguistic anthropologist Sarah Shulist has examined the linguistic landscape of Brazil's most Indigenous urban area, the municipality of São Gabriel da Cachoeira in the state of Amazonas in the wake of the coofficialization of Nheengatu, Baniwa, and Tukano alongside Portuguese at the local level.[17] Even as partial or even incomplete as state-led initiatives were in the São Gabriel context, they made openings for the use of these languages in an urban space that had been coded as thoroughly non-Indigenous, allowing for activists and officials alike to negotiate new linguistic possibilities in ways that trouble any "top-down" or "bottom-up" binary characterizations.[18]

Linguistic anthropologist Stephanie Love has written about place names in multilingual postcolonial urban contexts, specifically with respect to the context of postsettler, postrevolutionary Oran, Algeria, that "as poetic objects, urban forms can become emotional scaffolding and material anchors upon which unrealized desires, disillusionment, or senses of betrayal hang."[19] Love considers the poetics of vernacular place names used by taxi drivers and riders as they navigate Oran, Algeria. In what follows, we will encounter the residents of El Alto–La Paz navigating the urban terrain, but rather than a vernacular poetics of place names, the Bolivian case here concerns a state-led discourse mobilized through one of the largest public works in the country's history.

A recurrent trope in Aymara and, more broadly, Indigenous Bolivian political discourse is revolution as a process of inversion or reversal, often expressed with the concept of *pachakuti*, or the overturning of spacetime.[20] Another instance of this may be found in the advancements in the public transit system in the El Alto–La Paz metropolitan region, Mi Teleférico. Within the infrastructural realm of city residents traversing mountainous urban space, Mi Teleférico contributes to an inversion of historical framings of the Aymara and Spanish languages. We encounter Aymara and Spanish place names alongside one another in a changed configuration, with Aymara situated as textually superior to and graphically more prominent than Spanish because of a substantial difference in font size between the print of the respective languages (see figs. 5, 6, and 7). This arrangement diagramatically represents an inversion of what has been the presumptive relationship between these codes within the Bolivian public sphere. This new configuration was introduced during a historical period in which the relations between Aymara and Spanish languages, between El Alto and La Paz, and between Aymaras and white Bolivians had been called into question, and which are now in the process of undergoing rapid change. The El Alto–La Paz metropolitan region is undergoing transformation, encouraging an emergent, ascendant Aymara bourgeoisie, and these transformative changes in urban infrastructure prominently

feature Aymara language. Without indulging the notion that discourse can ever be immaterial (signs, after all, inevitably require materiality to be perceivable), this is a case where the discourse of inversion takes on a material dimension in the most familiar sense. Semiotic discourses of inversion and of Aymara political hegemony are reinforced with steel and concrete within a dramatic new development in the region's transit infrastructure, one that permits human movement through urban space, commerce, and sociality. The remainder of this paper includes a closer examination of this signage in the Mi Teleférico system, followed by interviews with riders and a key player in the establishment of the system.

A City Connected

The 2014 inauguration of the world's largest gondola-based cable car public transit system in El Alto–La Paz dramatically improved the lives of the region's residents. Seven aerial gondolas connect twenty stations across the cities of El Alto and La Paz, currently covering a horizontal expanse of ten kilometers (six miles) and connecting a vertical change in elevation of 400 meters. By the time of its completion, it will have eleven lines, thirty-nine stations, and will cover thirty-four kilometers (twenty-one miles). The gondola system has reduced travel times across the two cities, altering the space-time configuration of urban life in Bolivia's capital region. What might have required a two-hour journey on multiple crowded buses before Mi Teleférico can now be a journey of less than forty minutes in a suspended gondola, soaring through the air with views across the city and surrounding mountains.

Urban planning for the highest and most mountainous terrain of any national capital has been a persistent challenge. The notion that a cable car system could be the best option for mass transit in this mountainous city had been proposed in earlier decades but had never gained enough traction to become a reality. This changed when plans for the system began in the vice ministry of public works in earnest in 2011, with the eventual establishing of the public company Mi Teleférico and the inauguration of its first line in 2014.

The coordinator and technical adviser on the project during its development (2011–14) and Mi Teleférico's first executive manager following its inauguration, César Dockweiler, spoke with me in May of 2022. He discussed how the aim to improve transit for the residents of the metropolitan articulated with a broader vision of social transformation for the country:

"La Paz and El Alto are cities that give shelter to many Aymara-speaking people, and people from the provinces who speak Aymara as their first language and some as their principal language. So, being a project launched in the criteria and policy of a transformation of the country and the recuperation of its culture, the recuperation of its languages, to give value to the Indigenous population, as we should, even as owners of the land, etc. These are policies that have been established. [This] is a transformation of the country that has political, economic, and social transformations. A state policy that opens the door to the Indigenous nations where thirty-six nations are recognized in Bolivia. This is why we are plurinational, where we recognize other

languages. . . . [W]e have a new policy; we are newly recuperating the ancestral culture and we refuse to lose languages. . . . [W]e are a plurinational country, and this great project has to match this."[21]

Within this framework, the new transit system foregrounds Aymara language in text, alongside imagery and iconography drawn from Andean antiquity, within the linguistic landscape of the metropolitan area in a new way. Each of the twenty stations have both Aymara and Spanish names, with the Aymara names appearing above and in much larger print than the Spanish names (see figures 5, 6, and 7). Rather than operating within a mode of preserving Aymara heritage, this language policy intervention transformed the city's linguistic landscape by introducing Aymara text beyond areas of Indigenous confinement, extending the presence of Aymara language and aesthetics beyond El Alto into traditionally whiter corners of La Paz.

The Text of Infrastructure

A prominent and notable feature of the difference between Aymara and Spanish in the signage at Mi Teleférico stations concerns the relative size and placement of text. The Aymara names for each station appear larger and above the Spanish names. Dockweiler explained that the municipal promotion of Catalan language in Catalunya served as a reference point for him and others when considering how to move forward in considering the presence of Aymara within Mi Teleférico:[22]

"The idea was precisely this, that our signage would have certain details, that it wouldn't just be the same. And something that struck me as interesting is what they do in Barcelona. They prioritize Catalán, so obviously we can do that here."[23]

Some of the Aymara names for Mi Teleférico stops are calques of the Spanish names (see table 1). Central Station is *Taypi Uta* (central house) and the *Alto Obrajes* (upper Obrajes) and *Obrajes* offer direct translations, with the Aymara adjectives for "upper" and "lower" to become *Pata Obrajes* and *Aynacha Obrajes*, respectively. Other Aymara names for stations present rephonemizations of Spanish into Aymara. The neighborhood of Irpavi, for example, which shares the name with the river running through it, becomes *Irpawi*, the Spanish *v* switched for an Aymara *w*, the *v* being absent from Aymara phonemic inventory. The neighborhood Sopocachi has as its Aymara name Supu Kachi, each name now becoming a rephonemization of the other. The Peruvian linguist Rodolpho Cerrón-Palomino identifies Sopocachi as one of many Puquina-language toponyms in the region.[24] The fact that there are competing folk etymologies that alternately identify Quechua, *sapa kachi*, as a place for salt, or of Aymara *k'achi* (incisor tooth), referring to the sharp peaked hills visible at the neighborhood's perimeter, simply speak to the pervasive and ongoing engagement of residents in the use of Indigenous languages.[25]

The process of naming the stations occurred during the development of the project in the vice ministry of public works through consultation with a firm that convened an interdisciplinary team of historians, architects, linguists, Aymara language experts, and members of the municipal and federal ministries.[26] The firm, Cinenómada, was an organization primarily dedicated to the promotion of Bolivian film, but also specialized

in marketing and public affairs. This team advanced and discussed proposals for each of the proposed stops. The first report from the firm outlined its aims with the proposals: "The objective of the present work is to recover for each station the names related to our ancestral roots, with the objective of giving 'our own' name, permitting the presence of our past in this great work."[27]

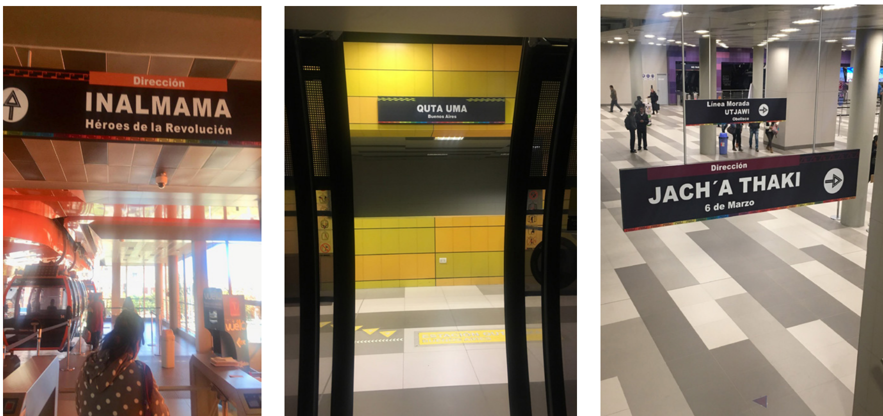
The Aymara names for other stops on the Teleférico are neither phonemic transformations nor calques, but instead invoke other features of the neighborhood served (see table 1). At first glance, some of these appear incongruous. Why, for example, would the *Héroes de la Revolución* (Heroes of the Revolution) be named *Inalmama* (see fig. 5)? Rather than a translation of "Heroes of the Revolution," passengers instead encounter the Aymara and Quechua name for the spirit of the coca plant. The Spanish name for the stop is quite clear; this stop is located immediately adjacent to the monument and museum to the 1952 Bolivian Revolution. Why then would the Aymara name be one associated with the coca plant? There is, of course, more to this neighborhood than the monument and museum to the 1952 revolution, and people familiar with the city know that this is the departure point for transit to the coca-producing Yunga valleys to the north of the city.

Table 1. *The relationship between the Aymara and Spanish of some Mi Teleférico station names*

Relationship between Aymara and Spanish Names	**Aymara Name** (English gloss)	**Spanish Name** (English gloss)
Calques	Taypi Uta (Central Building)	Estación Central (Central Station)
	Pata Obrajes (Upper Obrajes)	Alto Obrajes (Upper Obrajes)
	Aynacha Obrajes (Lower Obrajes)	Obrajes (Obrajes, the name of colonial-era textile mills)
Semantic link to an activity in the area of a Teleférico stop	Jach'a Qhatu (Big Market)	16 de julio (nationalist date, street name)
	Jach'a Thaki (Big Road, a transit hub)	6 de marzo (nationalist date, street name)
	Inalmama (Aymara traditionalist name for coca, a gateway to the coca-growing Yunga region)	Héroes de la Revolución (Heroes of the Revolution, the location of a memorial to the 1952 revolution)
	Ajayuni (With Souls)	Cementario (Cemetery)
Rephonemization of Aymara place names	Chuqi Apu (a river name, *Choqueyapu*, i.e., "potato lord/god")	Libertador (Liberator)
	Irpawi (a river name, Irpavi)	Irpavi (a river name)
	Supu Kachi (disputed term: perhaps "Lone Incisor" or "Only Salt." Linguist Rodolfo Cerrón-Palomino identifies this as Puquina.)	Sopocachi (disputed term: perhaps "Lone Incisor" or "Only Salt")
	Quta Uma (Lake Water—also, a neighborhood name)	Buenos Aires (a main street in Cotahuma neighborhood)

The seeming lack of correspondence between *Héroes de la Revolución* and *Inalmama* is one of multiple examples in which the translations of the Spanish name are not translations at all, but instead mobilize Aymara semantics to characterize the principal activities at the stop. The cemetery, for example, has the suggestive name *Ajayuni*, which combines the Aymara and Quechua word for spirit or soul, *ajayu*, with the Aymara attributive morpheme *-ni*, suggesting "with soul" or "with spirit." This name would be suggestive for many highland Bolivian Spanish speakers, as an *ajayu* is a concept that is an object of commentary in Spanish. Another case is *16 de Julio*, a stop that is named for a major thoroughfare in El Alto, itself named for the date of the 1809 uprising for independence from Spain in La Paz on July 16 of that year. The Aymara name for the stop, however, describes instead the primary activity located outside the stop, one of Bolivia's largest (and, by some accounts, one of Latin America's largest) outdoor markets. Rather than replicating the Spanish name of the stop, the Aymara name announces the *Jach'a Qhatu*, the "big market." Other names denote the activity surrounding the stop less directly but are still evocative. The *mirador*, or "overlook," stop, situated at the edge of El Alto on a cliff overlooking the city, has the name *Qhana Pata*. *Qhana* means "clear" and "light," *pata*, "above." A stop by El Alto's largest transit hub where buses leave for points west and south is *Jach'a Thaki*, or "big road" (see fig. 7)

Figures 5, 6, and 7. *Station Signs (photos by author).*



In explaining these differences between the Aymara and the Spanish names, Dockweiler mentioned the cemetery stop as an example of how this policy initially introduced the potential for confusion, but was also a kind of pedagogical opportunity. In the interview, he outlined the roles of the passenger and the station attendant, who would clarify that *Ajayuni* and *Cemeterio* are, in fact, the same station: "Some confusion was generated initially because the names were far from what people were used to. To say 'the cemetery' is to say 'Ajayuni station.' [A passenger would say,] 'No, I'm going to the cemetery'; [a station attendant might respond,] 'Yes, that's the station, that's what it's called in Aymara.' But that idea went on being constructed."[28]

The linguistic interactions most desired by the former director and planner of Mi Teleférico, however, would reach beyond semantic clarification and move toward loftier ends. The names of stations, he hoped, would become familiar with time. Dockweiler explained that his hope was that the gondola car itself could become an interactional context for cross-class and interethnic exchanges among the city's residents in the gondola itself, an interactional context that he hoped would become more than a vehicle of transportation, but a vehicle for national integration, a fiberglass and steel "nucleus of inclusion":

"So, we made ourselves participate actively in converting the Teleférico, not just as transit but as an instrument of integration, and we labeled the gondola as a nucleus of inclusion. When you enter a gondola, you don't decide to enter a first, second, third, or even an exclusive gondola just for myself. There's none of that. A gondola is for everyone . . . and ten people fit, sitting face-to-face, and have been selected in those ten minutes at random. Who entered was who had to enter. Very good, perfect. Sitting face-to-face are women in *polleras* [Indigenous dress] who speak Aymara, or a student, or a professional with their suit, or a child, or an elderly person. That situation of sitting face-to-face often generates an interaction. Someone speaks, makes a commentary, and later in those five minutes of travel a communion is generated. That's why we call it a nucleus of inclusion."[29]

Reading the City

In the summer of 2019, over the course of multiple days, I rode the Teleférico system in its entirery, speaking with any passenger willing to speak with me. I spoke with diverse riders: students on their way to classes, a retiree on his way to visit his son, people on their way to markets, and commuters of different sorts—doctors returning home after their hospital shifts, a janitor at the airport returning to her home on the other side of the city. One rider, Bryan Gutiérrez, a young man in his twenties, spoke to the peacefulness and beauty this mode of transport has introduced to his commute, peacefulness that include the improvements in security and personal safety: "It's transport that has totally improved Bolivia. Here in the city of La Paz, there's not that frustration of traffic jams. Here it goes above. In addition, you have a good view; you see the city, no? When you thought that it was all flat, you see the snow peaks, the hole. [It's] peaceful and safe above all else. Because in the public transport, a thief can come in and rob you, and you don't know. This is what I think is most important, that it's a clean and safe transport."[30]

In addition to the beauty and safety of this mode of transit, Bryan's comment also reveals his changed knowledge of the topography of the broader region. Before, his awareness was limited to the flat expanse of the city of El Alto. The gondola afforded him new knowledge of the character of the larger urban area. Other passengers also shared how the experience of riding the Teleférico afforded them new knowledge through visual access to the city. An older passenger named Jorge Irusta, fifty-eight, also spoke to how the Teleférico gave him a new perspective on the city, and helped him find a new place to find car parts: "It has a panoramic view. You discover things

that you didn't even know were there before. From here, you can see many things. We even learn things. For example, on the other side of El Alto—in Río Seco, is what the neighborhood is called—there's a place where car parts arrive, some enormous garages, car parts . . . and I didn't know that. Not just that, but you see all the kinds of commodities there. We learn things in another way."[31]

This new relationship to the city through the act of viewing, situated from above, was also emphasized by Ana, an airport worker who I spoke with on her commute home. Before Mi Teleférico, her commute would take two hours, a sacrifice she would make in order to secure her living. Now, with the new public transit system, her commute time has been reduced to twenty minutes for the same cost or even less, and in conditions that are not only more secure, but also pleasurable. Beaming with pride, relief, and enthusiasm about how the Teleférico has transformed her life, she also explained how her experience on her commute expanded her understanding of her society and her own imaginings of her place within it. "Have you gone on the yellow line? Have you gone on the green line? Beautiful. Amazing. There on the hill, some beautiful residences—beautiful, right? To be a fly on the wall there![32] Once a year, to be a fly there, in that space. Those luxury houses—gorgeous. I didn't even know that existed. Now you can see it. It's a beautiful thing."[33]

It struck me that, even in imagining herself in one of the mansions she is now able to view from above, she makes herself small, a creature out of place. Or perhaps this is simply making herself as small as anyone elswe when viewed from within a gondola car, as small as a fly (or a flea, *pulga*). Still, like Jorge, who found car parts in El Alto, or Bryan, who had previously imagined the entire region was as flat as his corner of El Alto, Ana's orientation to the world outside of the gondola car radically changed her understanding of it. Rather than a transformative experience within the gondola, as had been imagined by the urban planner, it was the experience of gazing out from its window to the city below, which had altered their perceptions of their city and its residents (see fig. 8).

Figure 8. *Riders look out over El Alto from within Mi Teleférico gondolas.*

Conclusion

As *Mi Teleférico* carries Alteños and Paceños over their cities, it not only transforms their lives through improved mobility in their daily lives but also their orientation to their society itself. This is true even in the most immediate sense of the word *orientation*: residents now regularly view their city from above, with scrutiny, curiosity, ownership, and admiration. We might consider a similar but also radically different kind of viewing of the city, described by Michel de Certeau in the opening chapter of in *The Practice of Everyday Life,* "Walking in the City":

> To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic. When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators. An Icarus flying above these waters, he can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below. His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was "possessed" into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more.[34]

The riders of Mi Teleférico with whom I spoke were similarly "bewitched" from their experiences assuming the scopic vision of a solar eye. Through this view, they learned new things about their city and their society. This view afforded them not only information about where to get used car parts but also the ability to observe the lives of the wealthy down in the depths of *La Hoyada*. These passengers' scopic view, however, did not gaze out from the heights of a monument to capital and finance, as in the case of de Certeau's World Trade Center view over Manhattan. These passengers' views were never a view from nowhere. These riders now move more comfortably and safely on cable cars brought to them by the government of their first Aymara president, who has placed Aymara names above Spanish ones throughout their transforming city. Passengers are seeing their city in a new way, but also reading Aymara and Spanish text in new ways. The Aymara language is viewed in a relation of prominence vis-à-vis Spanish, but also as distinct in new ways. Introduced are differences, where before there were few or even none, as in the case of Supu Kachi/Sopocachi.

The presence of Aymara text within Mi Teleférico could perhaps be viewed as an example of a tokenism that is irrelevant to the changes described by the riders in the interviews above. Aymara intellectual Carlos Macusaya has criticized what he views as cynical and essentializing mobilizations of tokens of Aymara and Quechua difference by politicians and others. He calls it *pachamamismo*, a symbolic mobilization of Aymara and Quechua language and culture, divorced from material improvements in peoples' lives.[35] One could ask, for example, whether the changes described by the passengers above could have happened with or without the presence of the prominently, and

even dominantly, displayed Aymara text in Mi Teleférico stations? To pose such a question in this way would be to presume that the investments in infrastructure and working class well-being would have been possible without the Aymara protagonism that ushered in these developments in the first place. Or that the Aymara-led social movements that gave rise to the social transformations in contemporary Bolivia could have been accomplished without these accompanying expressions of Aymara cultural and linguistic affirmation. While certainly some of the novel mobilizations of Aymara language and material culture may be found in contexts divorced from Aymara peoples' lives and well-being, such as the examples of fine dining and nightlife mentioned in the opening of this essay, these also demonstrate the shifting enregisterment of the Aymara language. With respect to Mi Teleférico, however, we encounter an instance in which radical improvements in the quality of life for Bolivians, Aymaras and non-Aymaras alike, arrive with a foregrounding of the Aymara language.

An important insight of Anthony Webster and Leighton Peterson from the introduction to their 2011 volume *Language in Unexpected Places* is that the notion of Indigenous languages being unexpected in particular social contexts is itself a result of the erasures of a racist society. They write that, "ultimately, the recognition of Native American languages in unexpected places—which are, in the end, not terribly unexpected in the communities in which they occur—reveals the obscuring and racist stereotypes of a dominant and dominating society."[36] The notion that Aymara language would always remain sequestered off in the heights, never to extend throughout the valleys below and throughout the entirety of the metropolitan region, was itself a perversion of racist domination. With Mi Teleférico, a more peaceful and quieter ride, with more leisure and beauty in one's day, and with one's language prominently displayed throughout the city, may be the expectation for an increasing number of Aymara Bolivians.

Notes

1. Asif Agha, *Language and Social Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

2. Susan Gal and Judith Irvine, *Signs of Difference: Language and Ideology in Social Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

3. Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 75.

4. The title of the film uses Spanish spelling norms in which *qui* is used rather than *ki*. When using the Aymara place name, I am choosing to use the Aymara spelling: *Chukiyago*.

5. Constantine Nakassis, "Realism, On and Off the Screen," in *Subramaniyapuram: The Tamil Film in English,* ed. Anand Pandian (Chennai: Blaft Publications, 2014), 214–20.

6. Jeff Himpele, *Circuits of Culture: Media, Politics, and Indigenous Identity in the Andes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Karl Swinehart, "The Road as National Chronotope in Bolivian Cinema," *Wide Screen* 7, no. 1 (2018): 1–21.

7. Rodrigue Landry and Richard Y. Bourhis, "Linguistic Landscape and Ethnolinguistic Vitality," *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 16, no. 1 (1997): 23–49; Durk Gorter, *Linguistic Landscape: A New Approach to Multilingualism* (Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters, 2006).

8. Mary Holland, "Why Bolivia Is the Next Foot Hotspot," *BBC Travel,* October 23, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20191022-why-bolivia-is-the-next-food-hotspot.

9. Sorrel Moseley-Williams, "How a Food Activist Revitalized Bolivia: Manq'a," accessed 2018, https://atlasofthefuture.org/project/manqa/

10. Cf. Karl Swinehart, "The Enregisterment of *Colla* in a Bolivian (*Camba*) Comedy," *Social Text* 113 (2012): 89; Karl Swinehart, "Gender, Class, Race, and Region in 'Bilingual' Bolivia," *Signs and Society* 6, no. 3 (2018): 615–19.

11. Charlie Hobbs, "The Fifty Best Restaurants in Latin America 2022 List Has Just Been Revealed," *Condé Nast Traveler*, https://www.cntraveler.com/story/50-best-restaurants-in-latin-america-2022.

12. Rodrigue Landis and Richard Y. Bourhis, "Linguistic Landscape and Ethnolinguistic Vitality: An Empirical Study," *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 16, no. 1 (1997): 23–49; Landis and Bourhis "Linguistic Landscape," 23.

13. Landis and Bourhis, "Linguistic Landscape," 25.

14. Durk Gorter and Jasone Cenoz, *A Panorama of Lingusitic Landscape Studies* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2024).

15. Nancy Hornberger and Teresa McCarty, "Globalization from the Bottom Up: Indigenous Language Planning and Policy across Time, Space, and Place," *International Multilingual Research Journal* 6, no. 1 (2012): 1–7.

16. Máiréad Moriarty, "Contesting Language Ideologies in the Linguistic Landscape of an Irish Tourist Town," *International Journal of Bilingualism* 18, no. 5 (2014): 459–533.

17. Sarah Shulist, "Signs of Status: Language Policy, Visibility in Urban Amazonia," *Language Policy* 17, no. 1 (2018): 523–43; Sarah Shulist, *Transforming Indigeneity: Urbanization and Language Revitalization in the Brazilian Amazon* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

18. Shulist, "Signs of Status," 541.

19. Stephanie Love, "Poetics of Grievance: Taxi Drivers, Vernacular Place Names, and the Paradoxes of Postcoloniality in Oran, Algeria," *City and Society* (2021): 1–22; Love, "Poetics," 3.

20. Karl Swinehart, "Decolonial Time in Bolivia's *Pachakuti*," *Signs and Society* 7, no. 1 (2019): 96–114.

21. *"La Paz y El Alto son ciudades que cobijan mucha gente Aymara parlante, y gente desde provincias que hablan Aymara como su idioma y algunos como su idioma principal. Entonces, siendo un proyecto que estaba embarcado en los criterios y la política de una transformación del país y la recuperación de su cultura, la recuperación de sus idiomas, darle el valor a la población originaria como corresponde y como propietarios inclusive de la tierra etc. Son políticas que se han establecido. Es una transformación del país que tiene transformaciones políticas, económicas y sociales. Una política de estado que abre la puerta a los originarios a los pueblos indígenas donde se reconocen las 36 naciones en Bolivia, por eso somos plurinacional, donde se reconocen la existencia de otros idiomas." ". . . Tenemos una nueva política, estamos nuevamente recuperando la cultura ancestral y no queremos que se pierdan idiomas . . . somos un país plurinacional y este gran proyecto tiene que coincidir con eso."*

22. Cf. Kathryn Woolard, *Double Talk: Biligualism and the Politics of Ethnicity in Catalonia* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1989); cf. Kathryn Woolard, *Singular and Plural: Ideologies of Linguistic Authority in Twenty-first Century Catalonia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

23. *"Justamente la idea fue esa, que nuestra señalética tuviera ciertas particularidades, que no fuera más lo mismo. Y algo que me pareció interesante es lo que hacen en Barcelona. Priorizan al Catalán. Entonces obviamente aquí podemos hacerlo."*

24. Rodolfo Cerrón-Palomino, "Tras las huellas de la lengua primordial de los incas: evidencia onomástica puquina," *Revista Andina* 54 (2016): 169–208.

25. "Sopocachi," *Wikiwand*, accessed July 31, 2022: https://www.wikiwand.com/es/Sopocachi.

26. The consulting team consisted of the following members: Juan Carlos Valdivia, filmmaker and director of CineNómada; Fernando Huanacuni, director general of ceremonies of the Ministry

of Exterior Relations of Bolivia; Iris Villegas, chief of the cabinet of the Ministry of Culture; Magdalena Cajías, historian and Bolivian consul in Chile; Fernando Cajías, historian; Ximena Medinaceli, historian; Martha Gonzales, Institute of Aymara Language and Culture; Vitaliano Huanca, language program coordinator for the School of Plurinational Public Administration; Pablo Michel, architect and historian; Eduardo Valdivia, architect and former advisor of the Autonomous Municipal Government of La Paz; César Dockweiler, director of the Technical Consulting Unit of Mi Teleférico; Fátima Sánchez, director of communication, Technical Consulting Unit; Silvia Salinas, director, Vice Ministry of Political Communication.

27. *"El objetivo del presente trabajo es rescatar para cada estación los nombres relacionados con nuestras raíces ancestrales con el objeto de dar un nombre 'nuestro' permitiendo que nuestro pasado esté presente en esta gran obra."*

28. *"Generó algo de confusión en el inicio porque los nombres estaban alejados de la costumbre de la gente. Es decir, cementario es decir estación ajayuni, 'no, yo voy al cementerio' Sí es esta la estación, así se llama, pero en aymara. Pero se fue construyendo esa idea."*

29. *"Así nosotros hicimos participar activamente convirtiendo el Teleférico no solo en transporte sino en instrumento de integración. Y lo calificábamos a la gabina como un núcleo de la inclusión. Yo lo veo así. Una gabina del Teleférico es un núcleo de inclusión. Cuando entras en una gabina, no decides entrar en una gabina de primera, segunda o tercera, niquiera una gabina exclusiva para mí. No hay eso. Una gabina es para todos. … y caben diez personas y se sientan frente a frente y han sido elegidas en esas diez minutos aleatoriamente. Entraron los que tenían que entrar. Muy bien, perfecto. Se sientan frente a frente las personas de pollera de habla aymara o un estudiante o un profesional con su ternito o un niño o una persona de tercera edad. Y esa situación de estar frente a frente muchas veces genera una interacción. Alguien habla, hace un comentario y luego en esos cinco minutos de viaje se genera una comunión. Por eso lo llamamos un núcleo de inclusión."*

30. *"Es un transporte que ha innovado totalmente Bolivia. Aquí en la ciudad de La Paz que no hay esa frustración de la trancadera, aquí va por arriba. Aparte tienes una buena vista, ves a la ciudad no? Cuando pensaba que era así plana, ves los nevados, la hoyada, tranquilo y seguro más que todo. Porque en el transporte público entra un ladrón te roba y no sabes eso es lo que creo es lo más importante, que es un transporte limpio y seguro."*

31. *"Aparte tiene una vista panorámica. Vas inclusive descubriendo cosas que ni te enterrabas antes. De aquí vas viendo muchas cosas. Hasta nosotros aprendemos cosas. Por ejemplo aquí había al otro lado de El Alto, en Río Seco se llama el barrio hay un lugar donde llegan partes de movilidades, unos garajes enormes, partes de movilidades. Y eso no sabía. No solamente eso pero ves todo tipo de mercaderiá que hay. Vamos conociendo de otra manera."*

32. I'm translating idiomatically. She says *pulga*, or flea, but "to be a fly on the wall" seems like the best English approximation.

33. *"¿A la amarilla has ido? ¿La verde has ido? Hermoso. Alucinante. Ahi en la lomita. Unas residencias bellas. Lindas no? ¡Con piscinas! muy bello. ¡Ser una pulga ahi! Una vez al año. Para ser una pulga ahi en ese espacio. Esas casas de lujo. Lindo. [Karl: Pues que antes no se podía ver, no?] No sabía ni que existía. Ahora se ve pues. Es una belleza."*

34. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 92.

35. Carlos Macusaya, *Pachamamadas: apariencia y dominación* (2018), accessed November 18, 2020: https://carlosmacusaya.blogspot.com/2018/07/pachamamadas-apariencia-y-dominacion.html?fbclid=IwAR0YlXCDVZP5pvX0l1g5iDKoeHkabNuq2Omfsvt8wBIYzKTFQhQJQg4y1hg.

36. Anthony Webster and Leighton Peterson, "Introduction: American Indian Language in Unexpected Places, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35, no. 2 (2011): 1–18.